6.1. Marriage, Mirage and a Game of Cards

‘Monsoon is not the best time to visit the Rann’, the local contact person of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) told the researcher upon hearing his plan to stay in Kharaghoda during the next monsoon season. The researcher understood what he meant only when he reached Patdi in August and was informed in the local bus stand that the overflowing stream has cut off the road link between Patdi and Kharaghoda. The only available option for him to reach the village was to hitch a hike till the overflowing stream on a motorcycle and then wade through it. While the statement of the NGO person on one hand pointed to the perils of data collection in the season, it also reflected several other aspects concerning the lives of the Agarias.

The reference to ‘monsoon’ as an unsuitable time to come to the area indicated the transformation that onset of the monsoon season brings about in the physical features of the Rann. As the Rann changes from a mud desert into a shallow lake, the lives of people living in the bordering villages also undergo a change. This change is quite marked in the case of Agarias as they are entirely dependent on the Rann for their livelihood. The annual migration of Agarias from their villages into the Rann after the monsoons to produce salt is a distinct point in their annual livelihood calendar. As shall be discussed in this chapter, the lives of Agarias in the Rann and in the villages are in stark contrast with one another and any outsider who has not had a glimpse of both, will certainly mistake them for two different communities.

Further, the perception of the monsoon as an ‘unsuitable time’ clearly pointed out the presence of a more suitable time to visit the Rann. This suitable time, as the researcher later found out is the winter season. It is probable that the NGO worker mistook the researcher for an over-zealous tourist and tried to suggest the time of the year which coincided with the tourist season. The ease of access and the presence of migratory
birds make the Rann a favored destination with tourists during the winter season. This is also the time when one can view the Agarias at work in their salt pans and wild ass herds inside the Rann. While these popular images of the Rann and Agarias highlight the uniqueness of their lives and the associated hardships, they also overshadow the other part of their lives that they spend in their villages. For the purpose of this study, it was essential for the researcher to stay with the Agarias during the monsoon, when they stay in their villages and also during the winter and early summer when they are in the Rann. This provided a complete comprehension of the diverse facets of the livelihood and conservation perspectives in the backdrop of the locale. This chapter will detail the lives of Agarias and their livelihood based on inland salt production.

The Agaria who was willing to take the researcher to Kharaghoda from Patdi alluded to the hardships faced by the Agarias during their stay in the village. He revealed during his brief conversation with the researcher that every monsoon, the overflowing streams flood all the approach roads, ensuring that everyone has to wade through knee deep water to be able to reach Kharaghoda or come to Patdi. After successfully negotiating these obstacles when he finally reached Kharaghoda, the researcher was greeted by the sight of huge white dunes of salt, a heavy air permeated with the smell of salt and a breeze blowing from the west. Looking around the village while trying to breathe in the air laden with salt particles, he got an overwhelming feeling as if salt has preserved the village and that it stood still in time. For a moment, the pervading calmness in the village, which has remained the most important centre of inland salt trade in India since the time of the British rule hid the conflict indicated by the damaged sign boards of the wildlife department.

Kharaghoda is divided into three parts; Junagam (Old Village), Nayagam (New Village) and Station. Junagam was entirely built by the British for its officials and salt workers. The clay roof tiled houses in this area dated back to the late 19th century. They were constructed in rows with the officer quarters located in the central part of the village and Agaria houses in the periphery. Almost every respondent in Dasada taluka would initiate the description of their village life with a reference to the colonial vestiges in Kharaghoda. Several tourist safaris to the Rann include a trip to this village. Tourist guides narrated the grandeur of the place during the colonial period that
included the ‘Bulkley Market’ constructed in 1905. According to them, inside the market the best products from across the empire were sold under one roof, ‘just like the malls in Ahmedabad’ they added. Today what remains of the splendor are dilapidated structures and buildings in need of repair and maintenance, like the ones which house the offices of HSL and the Salt Department.

Before venturing into the details of the life of Agarias, it has to be pointed out that Category I respondents of this study can be loosely classified into three groups based on their awareness of and involvement in the issues related to inland salt production and the WAS. According to this categorisation, the first group comprises of Agarias actively associated with the organisations working for them and aware of the issues involving the community. These respondents were very prompt in giving their replies and were also the most vocal among the three groups.

The second group consists of respondents who are not actively associated with any organisation, but take part in rallies and meetings and have some idea about the issues involving the Agarias. The respondents in the second group were initially reluctant to be interviewed and almost all of them asked the researcher to meet other educated persons in the village and in some cases referred him to the respondents in the first group. However, once they were convinced that giving the interview would not invite any trouble for them, they provided elaborate responses to the questions asked. This initial reluctance and the fear of harassment has been described by one of the respondents, ‘…times are very bad…how can we trust anyone…people come from Ahmedabad and ask all sorts of questions and it is said that they will use the information to stop us from going to the Rann…we have our children to feed…its better if only our leaders talk to the outsiders’.

Finally, the respondents who were involved in inland salt production, yet remained unaware of the larger issues associated with it comprise the third group. These respondents attempted to answer the questions in short sentences and frequently stated during the interview that they did not have the information sought by the researcher. Interestingly, some respondents told the researcher that several Agarias feign ignorance about what is going around them as they feel that expressing their views may get them
in trouble with the police because of their involvement in the illegal liquor trade. While 21.1 per cent of the respondents fall into the first group, 46.1 per cent and 32.8 per cent respondents belong to the second and third groups respectively.

Most respondents when asked about the history of the inland salt trade in the region could not provide any answer. This is in spite of the fact that the area is a major attraction for scholars and visitors interested in the history of salt trade in India. Those who responded, including some elders of the community, provided vague responses which pointed to the control of the trade by rulers of the princely states in the region. Based on what the respondents had heard from their earlier generation, they informed the researcher that before independence the British controlled the entire salt trade and Agarias were employed to produce salt from the sub-soil brine. One of the elders added during an interview that the British had selected Kharaghoda as the site of its salt works because of the proximity to brine at shallow depths and also being situated on a raised ground (Ghoda refers to a ‘hillock’ in the local language) it was easier to supply water to the Rann from Kharaghoda. The pieces of this broken pipeline made of the finest china clay can still be found for several kilometres inside the Rann.

The response given by most Agarias that their ‘job is to make salt and not bother about its history’ reveals their ignorance about and disinterest in the history associated with salt production. This disinterest was also reported by most Agaria youths during the FGDs. They said that it is useless to know about the history of a trade which will last only as long as the wells do not dry up, an event, which according to them, is most likely to happen during their lifetime. This lack of knowledge about the history and processes associated with salt production can be linked to the high illiteracy rate among the Agarias. The yearning of a community to know about the history of the trade it is associated with marks the beginning of a step towards challenging the exploitative processes linked with the trade. Absence of such longings among the Agarias is suggestive of their deplorable living conditions and is a possible deterrent against any collective campaign to assert their right to produce salt in the LRK.

It is worth mentioning that some respondents associated with the groups working for the rights of Agarias and a few youths expressed their desire to learn about local history
including that of the salt trade as it might enable them to find work as tourist guides in one of the several safaris. The interest in the history of inland salt trade was also shown by activists working on the issue of livelihood and conservation in the context of Agarias. They said that historical evidence of the presence of inland salt trade and the involvement of Agarias in it from ancient times will support their demand for inland salt production to be declared as a traditional right.

As the course of interview shifted from the history of salt trade to the story of Agarias and their involvement in the trade, the respondents were keener to answer the queries. 93.4 per cent of respondents interviewed for this study stated that they belong to the Chunvalia Koli community, while 6.6 per cent of respondents said that they are Dalits. All the Dalit respondents fall into the third group of the classification of Agarias discussed in the previous section. All the respondents noted that in Surendranagar district the Chunvalia Kolis have been traditionally associated with inland salt making in LRK and they constitute the largest group of inland salt producers. The tale of Agarias inevitably takes the shape of an account of the Chunvalia Koli community in the area.

The history of the salt producers of LRK was mostly gathered from interviews with the village elders. The respondents from the first and second groups also contributed to it by narrating stories of their origin which also brought out the linkages of Agarias with nature. The educated members of the Agaria community to whom the respondents directed the researcher, also provided information about salt producers of the LRK. While these persons were more than willing to speak to media persons and other seekers of information about Agarias, they seemed reluctant to share the information with the Agarias. Some of the respondents were of the opinion that such unwillingness stemmed from the fear that if everyone has access to resources, their importance would diminish and they will not be able to hog the limelight.

This comment can be verified by underlining the fact that any seeker of information on the Agarias or issues pertaining to them would be directed to the few educated persons by everyone in the community and those associated with it. Most Agarias also accord them a special status in the community as in their view ‘they have the books with
answers to your questions’. Observations during interviews with these members of the community further highlighted their efforts to maintain the position they enjoyed in the society. It has to be noted that everyone who had received education and became spokesperson for the community had struggled persistently, as their parents who worked in the salt pans could barely provide for the basic amenities. Each one of them told the researcher that he should not have wasted his time by roaming about in the Rann and asking Agarias about their history and instead should have visited them earlier. All of them invariably mentioned the number of media interviews they had given and after enquiring about the purpose of inquiry, would dig into the carefully dusted and preserved files and books to provide the necessary information. None of them approved of the suggestion made by the researcher to keep a copy of the books in the public domain and could not provide any reason to justify their disapproval.

The respondents from the first group and a few from the second group detest this dominion of a few educated members of the community. Referring to them they said ‘they do not even know how to hold the dantara’, alluding to the fact that the persons who speak to journalists and others who come to the area are not salt producers themselves and will never understand the issues of the Agarias. They even accuse these persons of stealing books from the old British library in Khadaghoda and feel that they will not hesitate to put their own interest ahead of that of the community. They allege that several salt cooperatives headed by these persons failed because of their corrupt practices. One of the youths stated that it was only after the recent media interest in the Rann and Agarias that these persons started associating themselves with the Agaria identity. According to him, their sympathy for the community is fake and only meant to ensure that their names get printed in the media reports.

Local member of a voluntary organisation stated that an Agaria has to face so much of hardship that anyone who escapes the grueling life, either through hard work against all odds or by mere stroke of luck, refuses to even accept the fact that they belong to the Agaria community. He lamented that unfortunately for the Agarias, most of the times the educated few colluded with the persons responsible for the miserable condition of the community rather than working for welfare the community. Confirming the statement of several respondents, he mentioned that there have been several instances
when after being elected as presidents of the salt cooperatives, they siphoning off funds ultimately leading to the bankruptcy of the cooperatives. His opinion of the educated young Agarias who are actively involved with issues pertaining to the community and who express their desire to fight the injustice meted out to Agarias was also not very positive, as he had seen many promising young men changing sides over the years and except for a few, he doubted the intentions of most of the present lot.

In this study, many such young men have been categorised under the first group of respondents. Like the other respondents of this group, they displayed a keen desire to provide their description of the Chuvalia Koli community and history of the salt trade in the area. Most of them repeatedly spoke against the self-appointed spokespersons of the Agaria community. It was evident from their statements that they feel that they can perform the role more effectively. The language used by these respondents is similar to the language spoken by members of the NGO working with Agarias. The comparison of the section of the transcript where these respondents provide a description of the Agaria village and Chunvalia Koli community with the transcripts of interviews with the NGO representatives shows more than ninety-five per cent word. The longer pauses and sentence repetitions in the transcripts of the respondents indicates that they wished to repeat the content and imitate the style of NGO representatives.

Most Agarias claim that their families have been migrating to the Rann for the production of inland salt for centuries. This annual migration to the Rann marks the end of their stay in the village and the beginning of salt making season and the period of stay inside the Rann. One story narrated to the researcher in Odu described the origin of the annual migration undertaken by Agarias. According to this tale, centuries ago the entire Rann was a sea and the Kolis were dependent on it for their livelihood. Satellite remote sensing data has supported the fact that the Rann was once a part of the sea and has also pointed out that the village of Zinzuwada is an ancient land locked port (Thakker, Raval, & Dasgupta; 1999). In addition to scientific data, the remnants of a lighthouse for sailors on the edge of the Rann in Zinzuwada further affirm the statement. Due to earthquakes, the bed of the Rann was gradually elevated and the sea receded. As the sea receded and their livelihood was threatened, the community panicked. Some members of the community started digging the earth to find the lost sea. This branch of the former sea dependent
community known as Padhar, finally settled near Nalsarovar in Gujarat. Many members of this community still earn their livelihood by working as earth diggers.

Kolis who stayed with their old leader prayed to the Sea Goddess to return the sea to them. After several months when their prayers went unanswered, the old leader decided to sacrifice his life on the altar of the Goddess. The night before the sacrifice the Goddess appeared in the dream of the old man and asked him to take his people inside the Rann and start digging till they found water. She instructed him to draw this water out and said that power of the sun rays would convert the water into salt. She told him that this salt would sustain the community. According to this tale, the Goddess also entrusted the task of protecting the Rann to the community. Since then Chunvalia Kolis have been migrating to the Rann to make inland salt. Based on this story several Agarias pointed out that they are protectors of the namu (little) Rann.

Respondents from the Chunvalia Koli community also claimed that they are the original inland salt producers in the area and that other communities took to salt production much later. Some held the opinion that only Chunvalia Kolis are capable of taking up this arduous task because of their physical strength. One respondent added that initially, because of their strength the Chunvalia Kolis were also known as ‘Kathor’ (tough). Over time this changed to ‘Thakor’. During the interviews, it was learnt that most Chunvalia Koli respondents referred to themselves as ‘Thakor’.

Lobo (1995) has stated that historical evidence has linked the ‘Thakors’ or ‘Thakarda’ with the ‘Kolis, the largest caste category in Gujarat’ (p.1). According to him, the word ‘Thakor’ is an honorific which can mean Lord Vishnu or the chief of a princely state. He has further argued that the use of this name by Kolis is reflective of a caste taking up a high sounding name to claim a higher social status. The ‘thakors’ have a gamshakha, which according to Lobo (2006), is a ‘collection of agnatic lineages dispersed in a few villages’ and constitute the largest ‘exogamous’ unit of Kolis of North Gujarat (p.48). As pointed out by Lobo and also seen from the names of respondents, members of the Chunvalia Koli community call themselves after the name of the village of their common origin like Degama, Bajania, Patdia etc.
Few respondents also informed the researcher about members of the community hired in the past as watchmen and the associated title of Pagi. During fieldwork, the researcher did come across families with this surname, but he could not locate anyone adept in the skill of identifying footprints. Significantly, most Chunvalia Kolis of the area including the youth are not aware of this tradition. One of the respondents whose ancestors were employed as watchmen commented that Pagis were so skilled in their profession that they never left behind their own footprints while investigating the scene of the crime. Ironically, it seems that while applying caution not to leave behind their footprints on the ground, they managed to ensure that their own community forgot them.

The attempt to draw a timeline of ownership of the salt trade through the interviews confirmed the narrative of secondary sources that this trade has shifted hands over time. Initially owned by the local Rajputs, the entire salt industry was controlled by the British till Independence (Plate V). After Independence, the Government of India, through its public limited company Hindustan Salt Limited took over the production of the inland salt in the area. The former employees of HSL constituted around fifty per cent of respondents interviewed for this study. These respondents stayed in Kharaghoda and the neighbouring villages of Mithaghoda, Odu, Patdi and Bajana. After the loss making company could not pay wages, it offered the workers VRS in 1998, as per rules of the Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR). All the respondents of this study who were employed with HSL have availed VRS and are allowed to produce salt independently in the part of the Rann leased to HSL. It has to be added that as per the categorisation of the Salt Department, all the respondents interviewed as part of this study belong to the Category IV and produce salt inside the Rann in land measuring upto ten acres.

While the respondents could not provide any information on the condition of Agarias in the pre-colonial era, they spoke at length about the British period. Three elderly participants of the group interviews had worked in the British owned salt company in Kharaghoda and the rest of the respondents centred their views on the information their elders had provided them. During a group interview, the respondents gave a score of 8 to the British period on a scale of 1 to 10 where ten represented best living and working
condition for the Agarias. The period when HSL controlled the salt production was given a score of 5.5 and the present time only got a score of 3. Though most of the respondents were born after Independence, all of them unanimously agreed that Agarias enjoyed their best times during that period. They also shared that during the time of British control of the salt trade, the Agarias got their payments on time and without the involvement of the traders. They were well looked after and an entire village was built for them. Importantly, drinking water was provided to them even when they were inside the Rann to produce salt.

One respondent added that the payment registers from the British period show that all Agarias had signed their names on it, in contrast to the present times when most of the Agarias put their thumb impressions, which pointed to the fact that they were provided with school facilities. They could avail free and quality treatment in the British hospital and could afford to purchase the best commodities from around the empire from the market in Kharaghoda. Almost ninety per cent respondents commented that given an option they would like to return to the British period, as during that period they would not have been required to deal with the sanctuary and its guards and live in the constant fear of being prohibited from entering the Rann. While concluding his interview, one respondent remarked that ‘it may come as a shock to you, but the end of the British rule in India also marked the end of the golden period of the Agarias...while India won freedom; the Agarias lost their independence’.

A significant majority of respondents feel that after Independence, the country may have achieved supremacy in terms of salt production, but the lives of Agarias of LRK plunged into darkness. Salt traders started monopolising the trade and most Agarias who had survived as independent workers went into perennial debt. Alcoholism and gambling further destroyed several Agarias families. Inspite of the prevalent gloom, the presence of HSL in the area ensured that this period was still better than the present time. HSL provided permanent employment to around nine hundred Agaria households in the area. Those on the company rolls were provided regular and timely credit, ration, diesel for the pumps and retirement benefits. Agarias employed in HSL would often support others who fall on hard times. All this changed when the company decided to give VRS to its employees. The respondents feel that the period within which HSL withdrew itself and the issue of the sanctuary started threatening their livelihood was the
worst that the Agarias have ever seen. The living conditions of most Agarias including those previously employed with the HSL has deteriorated and everyone is terrified by the thought of losing their Rann and the right to produce salt to the wild ass.

While most respondents spoke in favour of the British period and cursed the present times, one villager in Mithaghoda from the Luvana community argued that though Kharaghoda was undoubtedly a bustling place during the British rule, most facilities were built for the British officers posted here and Agarias did not have access to most of them. According to him, the tale of an imaginary glorious past only serves to demoralise the Agarias since they believe they can never recreate the times of the Pritchard Salt Works and hence they feel it is futile to struggle against forces exploiting them in the present time.

As employees of a company engaged in a trade over which the British held complete monopoly, the Agarias must have derived some benefits. The exact nature and extent of these benefits however remain contestable. Interviews with several persons who had worked on the issue of education in the community revealed that voluntary initiatives to improve the condition of Agarias after Independence had focussed on the high illiteracy rate in the community. This places the claim of high literacy rates during the British period on a shaky pedestal. Similarly, the scrutiny of birth and death registers during the British period available with Mr. Ambubhai Patel also showed a very high mortality rate in Agaria villages due to communicable diseases like tuberculosis. This cast doubts over the veracity of statements regarding the prosperous time during the British period. Careful recreation of a fascinating past could be one of the strategies adopted by members of the community to vent out their present day dilemmas and ordeal. For the members of a community who takes pride in calling themselves ‘thakors’, this association with a doubtful yet splendid past also helps in maintaining their dignity in front of outsiders, who otherwise have all reasons to believe that the community has always been stricken by poverty and gloom.

In addition to stating that inland salt production has been undertaken by the community inside the LRK since time immemorial, the NGO representatives and the respondents of the first group also referred to the firman. By referring to the firman issued by Mughal
Emperor Aurangzeb for the levy of tax on inland salt in the LRK, the respondents attempted to underline the age old connection between Agarias and their Rann. The firman validated their claim that the Agarias had been making inland salt much before most of the present day laws were promulgated. This claim has been one of their major arguments against the intended strategy of sanctuary officials to deny Agarias access to the Rann to produce salt. The firman, in their view supports the assertion that the practice of inland salt production should be considered as a traditional right of the community.

None of the respondents of this study owned any land other than their homestead. Both the Koli and Dalit respondents pointed out that most land in the villages on the fringes of the Rann is owned by Patels and Rajputs. The respondents also stated that being the two most powerful and influential castes in the area, members of these two communities have always exploited them. Koli respondents added that several members of their community did own land in the past, but had lost them to Patels and Rajouts due to the burden of debt. Singhji (1994) in his elaborate account of the lives of Rajputs of Saurashtra has described their subjugation of lower castes including the Chunvalia Kolis.

While describing their plight, Koli respondents also mentioned that they belong to the ‘Bakshi Panth’. This was a reference to the inclusion of the community by Bakshi Commission in 1976 under the ‘Socially and Economically Backward Classes’ and their OBC status in the state of Gujarat. Interestingly, the same respondents had earlier attempted to showcase a higher social status by referring to themselves as ‘Thakors’. Lobo (2006) has also described this contradiction portrayed by the Kolis of Gujarat, wherein they attempt to sanskritise themselves after the ‘Rajput model’ on one hand and on the other hand seek inclusion under the OBC category (p.62).

Interviews also highlighted the relationship shared by Agarias with members of other castes in the village. Agarias worked in the fields of Patels and Rajputs during the monsoon season as labourers. While they mostly used the adjectives ‘powerful’, ‘brave’ and ‘strong’ for the Rajputs; the Patels were referred to as ‘shrewd’, ‘crafty’ and ‘wily’. Patels were also the source of laughter in the otherwise miserable lives for the Agarias. Agarias in the Rann almost always mimic Patels of their respective villages and crack jokes on them to liven up their dampened spirits.
Plate V: Payday of Salt Pan Workers at Kharaghoda, 1919

Note: Salt Workers getting paid by the British Managers in Kharaghoda. Downloaded on 18 January 2010 from: http://socialhistory.org/en/collections/individual-wage-payments-india-agarias-pay-day-1
Agarias are also dependent on the Brahmins (priest), Luvanas & Vanias (merchant), Suthars (carpenter), Luhars (blacksmith), Kumbhars (potter), Hajams (barber), Darjis (tailor) and Ganchis (oil-presser). In addition to these castes, the villages visited by the researcher also had a sizeable population of members of the Muslims, Rabaris (cowherds) and Bharwads (shepherds). In some villages, respondents also reported the presence of a few families of the Bhajanias (folk musicians). The Vedraj (medicine man) and the Bhuva (spirit medium) enjoy important status in the lives of the Agarias.

In all the villages, the untouchable castes comprised of Chamarias (tanners) and Bhangis (scavengers). Their houses are on the outskirts of each village. The Dalit respondents informed that their plight is even worse than that of the Chunvalia Kolis. In addition to the threat to their livelihood, they are socially ostracised and face violence at the hands of members of the higher castes. In one such incident, which occurred in February 2010, more than thirty Dalit families had to leave the Zinzhuwada village after being attacked by members of higher castes. While this incident was reported by local newspapers, many such incidents are usually unreported.

In addition to threatening livelihoods of the Agarias and breeding hostility among communities in the area, the creation of the sanctuary has also hampered marriage prospects of Agaria men in these villages. Among the Agarias, sixteen years is considered a suitable age for the boys to get married and girls are married off by the age of fourteen years. In fact, the families start looking for a groom for their daughter the day she attains puberty. All the male respondents interviewed for the study were married before eighteen years of age and all the female respondents were married before they attained sixteen years of age. The respondents, while pointing out that the age of marriage is increasing in the community, noted that since the life expectancy of an Agaria male is only around fifty five years, it is essential for him to start his family early. Marriage also ensures an increase in the number of persons working in the salt pan, resulting in an increase in the family income.

The prospect of harsh life that their daughters will have to endure which includes staying in the desolate Rann for almost half of the year, dissuades most parents, including those who themselves have been working in the Rann from marrying their
daughter with a salt pan worker. The declaration of the sanctuary and the resultant threat to the livelihood of Agarias has further turned the scales against unmarried young men of the community. The situation has worsened to such an extent that no young Agaria was willing to get himself photographed with the researcher. They said that due to the publication of these pictures in the newspapers along with the tales of their hardship in the Rann, no family will want to marry their daughter to the Agarias. The matter has also been exacerbated by families demanding astronomical figures for their daughter’s marriage as bride price in the last five years.

While the Koli boys who have found work in the cities and those who have taken up agriculture in Dhrangadhra can afford prices upto one lakh rupees for a bride, arranging such huge amounts of money is almost impossible for an Agaria. The loss incurred in salt production in the last two years due to unseasonal rains has depleted the savings of many Agaria families and has also squashed the hopes of finding a bride for many young salt pan workers. During a marriage function that the researcher attended in Mithaghoda village, one respondent pointed out that in the past, during the monsoon season, almost everyday one could see the barat (wedding procession) of an Agaria. However, in the last few years, very few Agaria marriages have been solemnised.

It was also reported that there have been several fall outs of the inability of young Agarias to find brides from within the same caste. The first has been the purchase of brides from other regions through middlemen. Second, there have been several instances when brides from other communities failed to adjust to the life in the Rann and left the Agaria boy. In many such cases, the money was also not returned by the middleman. Third, there has been an upsurge in the cases of depression among the Agaria boys. Sambhubhai in Odu, remarked during the discussion on this topic that when Agaria boys look around and find that other young men including those from their caste, who have left salt making are getting married, it is very natural for them to despair. He added, ‘in the village if a boy remains unmarried people make fun of him…ask questions regarding his manhood’.

Unable to bear such taunts several young Agarias have taken the extreme step of ending their own lives. During the short period of two months when the researcher stayed in
the village of Kharaghoda, eight cases of suicide involving young Agaria men in the age group of twenty five to thirty years were reported from villages bordering the Rann. After function organised by the local police department to reward villagers who had assisted the police in recovering the bodies of suicide victims from the streams, Shashibhai from Junagam stated that it is an honour he accepted with a shattered heart. He told the researcher after the meeting, ‘while some young men have committed suicide, others are ending their lives in the local tavern...who would like to go to the Rann and make salt when you cannot even get yourself a bride’. Referring to the unending woes of Agarias, the statement also highlights the disenchantment among a section of Agarias towards inland salt production.

In the atmosphere of gloom and dejection which prevailed in the villages bordering the Rann during the monsoon season of 2010, Agarias eagerly waited for the festival of ‘satham-atham’; which falls on the seventh and eighth days of ‘Krishna Janmastami’ (Birth of Lord Krishna). This festival is significant for Agarias as it marks the beginning of the new salt production season. During these two days, salt traders or money lenders working on behalf of the traders fix the price of salt to be produced by Agarias in the forthcoming season. The festival is important because it is the only major festival which Agarias can celebrate in their village, since during the other festivals they remain inside the Rann.

From almost a week preceding the festival till atham (the last day of the festival), most Agarias gamble and consume alcohol. They also try their luck in teenpatti (a game of cards). While teenpatti is closely associated with Janmastami throughout Gujarat, the manner in which Agarias of LRK were seen engrossed in this game during the festival is worth mentioning. The researcher noticed that the lanes of all the villages were full of Agaria men and women squatting around a mat in small groups and placing bets. Kids who could barely walk were seen absorbed in this game. Agarias were so immersed in their game of cards and alcohol that hardly anyone was interested in playing the game of question and answer with the researcher.

This week long festival culminates with Agaria men and women performing dandia in the village courtyard on the day of atham. The sound of dandia beats and the smell of
mohanthal (a local sweet prepared from gram flour) blend with the sound of shuffling card decks and the all permeating odour of local spirit. Villagers from other communities held the opinion that this weeklong gambling and drinking spree is a way for Agarias to cope with the hardship they endure during their stay inside the Rann. Many of them narrated stories of Agaria families being devastated during the period. One person remarked, ‘no one has ever heard of an Agaria leaving the mats of teenpatti as a winner’. Discussions with Agaria respondents revealed that the prospect of staying away from friends while being in the desolate Rann, coupled with the fear that they will never return back to their village from the inhospitable locale to celebrate the festival again are factors which pushes the salt workers to overindulgence during the festival.

One respondent who had stopped going to the Rann five years ago commented that it is the lure of becoming rich that make Agarias play the game of cards. If by chance they win on the mat, they will not be required to make the journey to the Rann again. Disappointed and in many cases dispossessed of their money they are left with no other option but to go to the Rann and make salt in the hope that their salt will fetch a good price and that they will not be required to rely on the game of cards for a better life. According to him, it is a vicious circle which pushes the Agaria further into a state of misery and despair. He added that the condition of the Agaria is akin to that of a thirsty traveler chasing a mirage in the Rann. Like the traveler, the Agaria also perishes without finding a glimpse of what he is looking for throughout his life. The respondent concluded by asking the researcher, ‘bhai, kya hamari zindagi bhi teenpatti ka ek khel nahi hain?’ (Brother! are not our lives also a game of cards?).

6.2. Brine, Salt Pans and Wagons

As families bade a teary farewell to their daughters returning to their marital homes the festival, the discussion in the village courtyard also shifted from bets to salt prices. Based on the classification of Agarias according to their salt production arrangement with the lease holder (Bharwada and Mahajan, 2008), it can be stated that all the respondents worked under the contract system. Under this system, the salt trader who is in most cases also the lease holder, finances the cost of production including the food
expenses of the Agaria and his family during the season. The Agaria is also bound to sell the entire salt produce to the trader at a pre-fixed price. In the study area, all salt production related activities are carried out on a piece rate basis.

More than ninety per cent of respondents said that they have always been offered a lower price for their produce by the salt traders. It came out during the interviews with the Agarias that misery befalls them much before they ventured into the Rann. Their exploitation starts the day the price of salt is fixed by the traders. Traders mostly refer to the falling demand for inland salt and the resultant dwindling profit from the trade as an explanation for the low price being offered to them. As pointed out by a development professional, traders also take advantage of the absence of a collective voice representing the interest of inland salt producers. Elaborating upon the role of salt cooperatives (namak mandali) started by Late U. N. Debar (former chief minister of Saurashtra), to assist the Agarias to get a reasonable price for their produce, he said that traders started manipulating the salt cooperatives soon after they were formed in the early 1950s. They were assisted by the corrupt Presidents and Secretaries of these cooperatives, a majority of whom were Agarias. He added that the non-renewal of leases inside the LRK for salt production due to the notification of the sanctuary dealt the death blow to these defunct cooperatives. All respondents of this study are members of at least one salt cooperative. However, they stated that the cooperatives had stopped functioning decades ago. The respondents said that they have no other option but to do business with the salt traders individually.

After the fixation of price of salt to be produced in the Rann, Agarias receive the first installment of their loan from the trader. It was reported that though few Agarias do not fix the price of salt with the trader before the season, every Agaria including the erstwhile employees of HSL has to take advance payment before venturing into the Rann. The advance taken by respondents to prepare for their journey inside the Rann ranges between Rs. 15,000 - 20,000. Since the time of British control over inland salt trade till the time the Agarias were employed by HSL, a specific date from which they could migrate to the Rann was announced from the village courtyard. This date was decided upon after discussions with the village elders and no Agaria was allowed to
travel inside the Rann for salt production before this date. While no official dates for undertaking the journey are announced now, the Agarias still seek the advice of elders before venturing inside the Rann.

The time of migration to the Rann for salt production is dependent on the intensity of rainfall during the monsoon. When the rainfall during monsoon season is scanty, the Agarias of Dasada taluka start migrating to the Rann from the month of Bhadra (August-September) and when it is heavy they wait till the month of Ashwin (October-November) to go inside the Rann. Due to a longer period of inundation of the Rann near the villages of Dhrangadhra taluka, Agarias living in this taluka start salt production only after the first week of November. The selection of an appropriate time to migrate inside the Rann depend on the surface of Rann becoming conducive for initiating the process of salt making. This showcases the knowledge possessed by Agarias about their surrounding and the integral relationship that they share with their environs.

As the day of moving inside the Rann came closer, all members of the Agaria family get involved in completing the preparatory tasks. Agarias who are certain of not returning to the site they had used for salt production in the previous year and had brought the engines with them from the Rann, get busy in repairing these machines. Agarias spend around Rs. 4,000 of the advance they receive from the trader in the replacement of the nozzles, plunger and crank shaft of the engine and the pump. The suthar repairs the equipment used by them inside the salt pan. This consists of dantaala (rake), pavdi (tool with a flat wooden board and long handle), pavdo (spade), faantiya (rake with fewer teeth) and tagaara (metal container for lifting materials). Agarias also purchase on an average, two barrels of diesel or crude oil from the oil merchant, based on whether they power their engine to draw brine from the kui (well) using a generator or use crude oil. It was found that almost two-thirds of the respondents rely on a diesel generator to run the engines. According to one youth, this number has more than doubled in the last five years.

Depending on the amount of money left after the repair of the machines and purchase of diesel or crude oil, Agarias buy provisions for their first two to three weeks of stay inside the Rann from the Lohana. They also collect the payments due to them from the
land owners who had hired them as agricultural labourers during the monsoon season. In addition to collecting payments and buying the necessities, Agarias visit the local temples to seek divine blessings for the season ahead. The Brahmin priests in the temples take the offerings made by the Agarias and forecast the hurdles they are likely to face inside the Rann. It is also very common for Agarias to visit the Bhuva in an attempt to appease the spirits of the Rann.

During this period of hectic activity, Agarias have to interact with members of different communities. This period also brings to fore the enduring conflict between Agarias and the sanctuary officials. Sanctuary officials try to prevent the entry of Agaria groups mostly comprising of women into the jungles on the fringes of the sanctuary. The collection of branches of Babul tree (Acacia nilotica) from these jungles is undertaken to fulfill the need for firewood by Agarias during their stay inside the Rann. This is seen by sanctuary officials as an act that has to be prevented and the perpetrators punished.

Amidst this conflict and uncertainty which has been heightened by the submission of the WAS survey settlement report rejecting the claims of almost all individual Agarias making salt inside the LRK the families initiated movement to the Rann. On the chosen date of travel to the Rann in the middle of October 2010, when the researcher was present in Khadaghoda, families loaded the necessary provisions on a tractor. The tractor owner charges the Agarias between Rs. 1500-2000 for the journey, depending on the distance to be travelled inside the Rann. As the families took the road to the Rann, the elderly persons prayed to the almighty for their safe return. One of them told the researcher that in their times the families used to travel to the Rann on a cart drawn by a camel. The tractors heading towards the Rann were a cause of excitement for the children in the village. Those who were left behind with the elderly parents or in the seasonal hostels ran along with the tractors till the end of the metallic road which runs a few kilometers from Junagam to inside the Rann. Gradually, the tractors disappeared inside the Rann, leaving behind their tracks on the wet and muddy surface of the Rann.

Families of eight respondents interviewed in Dhrangadhra taluka do not migrate and stay in their respective villages during the salt production season as their salt pans are
located at an average distance of four kilometres from their village. The families of respondents in Dasada taluka travel an average distance of around twenty eight kilometres inside the Rann to reach their site of salt production. Almost ninety per cent of the families of respondents as per convention opted to construct their makeshift shelter and dig the well at the site of salt production used by them during the previous year. The rest of the respondents, all of whom who were from Dasada taluka, had to find a new site due to the declining level and quality of brine in their wells. Even among the respondents who did travel to their previous sites, a little more than one-tenth of them had to move to a new source of brine, again due to the same reasons.

The availability of brine above 14° Beaume at a nearby distance from their village is critical for the Agarias to continue inland salt production in LRK. The declining level of brine in LRK, except in areas of Halvad taluka near the creek is a major cause of apprehension about the sustainability of the profession in the near future. Respondents estimated that in the last ten years, the distance travelled by Agarias inside the Rann has increased almost six to eight times. Recounting their miseries, one respondent said, ‘…fifteen years ago abundant brine was available about five kilometres from our villages…things have totally changed in the last ten years…now you will find Agarias travelling upto 40 kilometres inside the Rann trying to locate a good source of brine…’.

With an increase in the distance travelled by the Agaria inside the Rann, the chances of finding a source of brine suitable to undertake salt production decreases substantially. This also increases the monthly cost of travel to the village to procure provisions for the family leading to a marginal increase in the total cost of production of salt. However, the declining level of brine in the wells and the resultant increase in the requirement of diesel or crude oil to operate the engines result in a very steep rise in the total production cost due to the escalating fuel costs. In the near future, the ever-increasing cost of inland salt production, coupled with the stagnation of salt prices offered by the traders can make it non-viable for Agarias to migrate to the Rann.

Battling these uncertainties, the respondents selected the site for salt production and built their shelter out of bamboo poles, gunny bags and grass over pits dug in the Rann
to protect themselves from the wind. A plastic sheet acted as a roof for their makeshift hut. This was followed by beginning of the process of inland salt production. All the respondents produce *poda* salt, which is a variation of *vadagara* salt referred to in Vakil (1924). Based on their description of the process of production, it can also be concluded that the Agarias of LRK follow similar steps for producing this variety of inland salt. The respondents of the first group and the individuals working with the Agarias to protect their rights to produce salt in the Rann repeatedly stressed upon the fact that the process of inland salt production is entirely based on traditional knowledge which has been passed from one generation of Agarias to the next.

Most respondents leave their engines wrapped in a plastic sheet inside a hole in the Rann before returning to their villages at the end of the previous season. This is done with the intent of saving the cost of transporting these machines repeatedly. These respondents initiate the production process by repairing these engines which takes around three days. The repair of the engine and other machines is followed by the construction of a well with a depth of around 10-12 feet and installation of the pump to draw the brine. According to Gupta (1977), the brine bearing gritty sandy clay layer is found below two upper layers of silty clay. Only the Agarias men are involved in digging the wells, placing the pump into it and sinking the bore to draw the brine. Boring has to done in every new well dug by the Agarias. They always plug the opening of the pipe inside the bore in the old wells at the end of the season to prevent its clogging. This ensures that they are not required to bore again when they re-excavate the wells.

The completion of the well, together with the installation of pump and bore takes around 7-8 days for completion in case a new well is dug. During this exercise the respondents seek the assistance of other Agarias. Many a times during the process of digging the well, the earth tends to collapse around the Agaria suffocating him to death. The average depth of the brine layer is around forty six feet below the surface of the Rann. To draw the brine, an eight horse power engine with a capacity to draw brine from 30-45 feet depth and pump 15-20 feet upwards is connected to the generator on one end and on the other end it is connected to the pump placed at the bottom of the well. While those who had shifted to generators can simultaneously operate four
engines connected to it, those relying on crude oil run engines need one set of engine and pump for each well.

Almost fifty per cent of the respondents had to draw the brine from a depth which is more than the average depth of the layer of brine. As stated earlier, the declining level of brine is a major cause of apprehension among the Agarias. It was reported by the respondents that the number of Agarias who had to discontinue the customary practice of using the old well has risen sharply in the last decade. Almost three-fourths of respondents had to dig a fresh well to be able to continue salt production. This number increased to more than eighty per cent if only the respondents of Dasada taluka are taken into consideration. The respondents also pointed out that during the initial part of the season, the well yields around 12,000 litres of brine everyday. According to them, in the last five years it has been observed that from the middle of the season the output from the well would fall drastically. This leaves Agarias with no other alternative but to dig more wells during the season.

The analysis of data reveals that nearly eighty five cent of respondents had to dig more than one well during the salt production season. Among these respondents, around fifteen per cent who belong to Dasada taluka had to dig more than three wells to maintain adequate supply of brine for the production of salt. The involvement of additional physical energy and financial resources for digging a well and sinking a bore inside it worsened the situation of Agarias. Most of the times, the respondents fail to find sufficient and quality brine even after digging and boring inside four-five wells. The declining level of brine has escalated the consumption of diesel and has also caused recurrent breakdowns of the pump and the engine, leading to an additional increase in the maintenance expenditure in the last five years. Respondents reported that they have to use an average of (8-10) barrels of diesel during the entire production season for each pata (crystalliser). The frequent need to get down to the bottom of the well to repair pumps entails a heightened exposure to poisonous gases. As one youth concluded, ‘…the well of life has turned into a well of woes for the Agaria…’

Usually the well is dug near the condenser and the brine drawn from the well is led by gravity into the gamdu (condenser) through a nine inch wide and three inch deep earthen
channel. As the brine level in the wells decline during the season, respondents have to feed the condenser with brine from a new well which in most cases is more than one kilometre away. After the construction of the well, the respondents prepare the condenser with an embankment of about one and a half feet. Its construction involves loosening and scrapping of the soil. Respondents hire tractors and labourers in addition to assisting each other in this work. The number of condensers depends on the size of the pata and the density of the brine. Most respondents construct ten condensers with a slope towards the crystalliser for a single pata of the size 180 feet by 90 feet in about a week. The respondents use karam as the unit of measurement of length of the various structures associated with the salt pan. One karam is approximately equal to three feet.

After finishing the work on the condenser, respondents allow brine from the well which has a density of (15°-18°) Beaume to flow into the first gamdu. During this period of filling up of the condensers, the respondents have to keep the engine operational for twenty four hours of the day. As the brine flow through the condensers, its density increase due to gradual evaporation. When the density of brine reaches 24° Beaume in the last condenser, it is allowed to flow into the pata (crystalliser). Respondents prepare the pata immediately after completing the work on the condensers and allowing them to fill with brine.

The preparation of crystalliser which takes around ten days involves, making of clay dikes of about fifteen inch, puddling, trampling and leveling followed by its hardening and finishing. A small quantity of brine is let into the bed of the crystalliser and Agarias trample the bed with their bare feet. This process of hardening the crystalliser bed is locally known as Pagli and is commonly done by Agaria women. It is essential for the crystalliser to be leveled, impervious and possess a slight slope to allow equal distribution of brine throughout the structure. The respondents stated that with the decline in the availability of brine, the number of pata prepared by them have come down from an average of six to three in the last few years.

The respondents said that on an average it takes almost one month to prepare all the structures required for initiating salt production. This time varies with availability of brine in the well, size of the pata and the manpower used by respondents for these
tasks. Once the *pata* is ready, it is filled with brine to a depth of around five inches. The embankments of the *pata* are protected from erosion by layering them with *zypto* (*triumfetta rhomboidea*). The density of brine inside the *pata* is maintained at (25°-26°) Beaume and is left undisturbed for around fifteen days to allow the formation of a half an inch layer of salt on its bed. In the process of *poda* salt production, also known as ‘salt over salt’ (RTIG, 2000) brine is released over this initial layer of salt. The twigs of *zypto* are spread in the *pata* to act as *udeepak* (catalyst) in the process of formation of the seed crystals. In ten days the seed crystals are formed around the twigs.

Figure 6.1 shows the activity chart of respondents based on average time undertaken in each activity from the day of departure to the Rann (taken as 14 October) till the point of formation of initial crystals inside the *pata*. This process of inland salt production is a variation of the earlier process involved in the production of *vadagara* variety of inland salt, which has been discontinued. For producing the *vadagara* variety of salt, the initial crust formed was broken up and crystals were allowed to form directly over the soil. This salt was tinged with a brownish colour which reduced its market value leading to the cessation of its production by the Agarias of LRK.

![Activity Chart of Respondents inside LRK](image_url)

*Figure 6.1: Activity Chart of Category I Respondents inside LRK*
In the next step of production, the seed crystals are removed from the twigs and dispersed in the *pata* followed by running the *Pavdi* (spade) all over the crystalliser to break the initial seeds into finer crystals. During the process of salt formation, the crystalliser is raked using a *dantala* and smoothened by *pavdi* every alternate day to prevent the formation of *popdi* (salt flakes), enhance the rate of crystal formation and spread the formed crystals evenly inside the crystalliser. Both men and women are involved in this painstaking task of raking the *pata* which adversely affect their health.

Working and living under miserable conditions, the respondents continue the exercise of raking till the end of the process of salt formation to ensure that crystals do not coalesce and remain separate from each other. After around forty-five days the supply of fresh brine to the *pata* is stopped and the density of the brine inside it is allowed to rise till 29° Beaume. The bittern or mother liquor is drained to another reservoir known as *faran*. The respondents recharge their *pata* with brine and allow the crystals to grow in size till middle of March. It takes around four and a half months for the *poda* salt crystals to be ready. The crystals attain a size of a little more than one inch towards the end of the salt production season and form a layer of around (7-8) inches on the bed of the *pata*. The raking during this final stage is done by the *faantia*. The respondents also have to protect the formed crystals from the dust laden winds *udaan* and *vaavar* by constructing barriers known as *culi*.

By the end of March, respondents begin harvesting their crop. This involves the piling up of salt into parallel ridges inside the *pata* using a *pavdi*. These piles are allowed to dry and after around three days they are heaped outside the *pata*. All the family members put in their efforts to accomplish this task. Many respondents also engage labourers for this task. Once heaped outside the *pata* the salt is loaded on to trucks by labourers and brought to the *ganja* (storage sites) like the one located near Khadaghoda railway station. Respondents in Dhrangadhra reported that they transfer the salt directly from their *pata* to the trucks. The labourers charge around Rs. 60 per metric ton of salt during this stage. The cost of loading in trucks is shared by the trader and Agarias.
Respondents of this study produce only a single crop of ‘poda’ salt during the season of salt production inside the LRK. According to them, the Agarias who are involved in the production of karkach salt in the marine belt of Gujarat and those migrating to LRK from Maliya taluka of Rajkot district produce eight to twelve crops of salt each season. This lowers the risks associated with loss of crop during the season. Based on the data obtained from the respondents for the salt production season 2010-11, it was found that the average production of salt was around eight hundred metric tonnes per respondent family. Thirty-one per cent of the respondents reported a total production of one thousand metric tonnes or more. The production of salt is dependent on the size of pata, which in turn is determined by the availability and quality of brine. In most cases, respondents had to also reduce the number of pata due to lack of manpower. The average price obtained by respondents for their produce is around eighteen paisa per kilo. Several respondents stated that citing the reason of poor quality (judged mostly on the physical appearance of the crystals) they are paid a reduced price than that which is fixed at the beginning of the season by the traders.

In the study area, the cost of production of one metric ton of salt during the season (including the cost of food for the family) is around Rs. 160. Based on the estimate that respondents require around ten barrels of diesel, costing around Rs. 10,000 per barrel for the production of eight hundred metric tonnes of salt, cost of diesel accounted for around sixty per cent of total cost of production. Data also reveals that a significantly large number of respondents (nearly forty-five per cent) ended up making a loss at the end of season. While the average loss incurred was around Rs. 30,000, ten per cent of respondents suffered a loss of Rs. 50,000 or more. The respondents stated that in addition to the dipping level of brine in wells, the heavy rains in November which destroyed the structures constructed by them in Rann was also a major cause of the loss incurred by them. In fact, heavy rainfall during the salt production season had led to a decline in the total salt produced in India during 2010-11 (GoI, 2011). A local journalist predicted that changes in the local rainfall pattern (prolonged monsoon or unseasonal rains) due to possible global climatic changes will be disastrous for the inland salt trade and force the Agarias to return home from the Rann in debt.
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The respondents informed the researcher that returning without profit from the Rann is very common for the Agarias. In the last few years the number of Agarias incurring a loss at the end of the season and the magnitude of loss has increased substantially. One Patel villager pointed out that since the Agarias return from the Rann in debt they have to borrow again from traders to sustain their families during the period of their stay in the village. The family plunges into further debt when someone falls ill or in the event of a death in the family. It came out during the discussion with respondents that several Agaria families are perennially in debt with the traders.

Agarias have no role in the post-production stage which commence after the salt is loaded on the trucks inside the Rann. Traders handle all the operations involved in this stage. Trucks bring the salt to the storage site near Rann, where it is unloaded and weighed by the salt department. Usually the traders make an adjustment of around five per cent to account for future loss during storage, mainly due to the monsoon showers. After weighing, based on the total loan advanced to the Agarias during the season, they are either paid the amount due to them or their debt is carried over to the next season.

The final steps of this stage involve the crushing and iodisation of the salt, the packaging of iodised salt into sacks and loading of these sacks on to railway wagons or trucks for transport. During this stage of salt production, labourers from several other states and other parts of Gujarat come to Kharaghoda and other sites where salt is stored to work as daily wage labourer. The respondents stated that in the past, Agarias rarely worked as labourers at the storage sites. However, nearly thirty per cent of the respondents mentioned that due to the huge losses incurred by them in the Rann in the last few seasons, they themselves or someone from their family had to work as a daily wage labourer at the storage and loading sites. In addition to working in the storage and loading sites, respondents also take up work as agricultural labourers (around forty per cent) and charcoal makers (around fifteen per cent) during their period of stay in the village.

From these storage sites, the salt produced in LRK is transported through both railways and the roadways. UP, Nepal and Madhya Pradesh are the major markets for this salt.
The salt also has a market inside Gujarat, Chhatisgarh, Delhi and is also bought by the army. This salt is used for both human and industrial consumption. The demand of salt from various markets is fixed by the commission agents. The traders sell the salt to these agents who charge a commission of around Rs. 20 per metric ton. Based on the demand, railway wagons are booked by traders to transport the salt. The wagons are issued by the salt department as per quota to the authorised traders. Only iodised salt can be booked by rail for human consumption. Few respondents who are aware of the salt trade informed the researcher that the salt market is controlled by the close knit association of traders in the area in collaboration with rail and salt department officials. According to them, this iron grip over the market enables the traders to earn maximum profit from the sale of the inland salt.

According to a professor in Gujarat Vidyapeeth, the association of salt traders of LRK adeptly manipulates the allocation of railway wagons to their benefit. This also prevents the entry of any new player into the trade. The closed offices of Sabarmati Salt Farmers’ Society (SSFS) near the Rann, on the outskirts of Kharaghoda since the year 2000 affirms the influence of salt traders in the area. Initiated by Late Dr. Verghese Kurien on the lines of AMUL, SSFS was forced to close its office after incurring severe losses due to the tactics of the salt traders association. Except the traders and a few villagers from other communities, respondents across all the categories said that traders exploit the vulnerable position of the Agarias. Already in debt from the previous year and pressurised by the ‘oligopsonistic market’ created by the traders (Rani and Iyengar, 2001; p.46), Agarias are left with no other option but to reluctantly accept the price which is much lower than the market price of inland salt. They can only pray for a better yield of salt in their next visit to the Rann so as to break the vicious cycle of debt.

Most respondents remarked that their prayers have always gone unheard. They informed the researcher about instances in the last two seasons when frustrated by the lack of availability of a good source of brine and due to unseasonal rains, few Agarias were forced to leave the Rann without making salt. Pointing out the rarity of such cases, they added that inspite of the increasing hardship, almost every Agaria who comes to
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the Rann completes the process of the salt production. Agarias are apprehensive of the future and think that it can become a common trend for them to return back without producing a single crystal of salt.

6.3. Tears of Salt: The Plight of Agarias

During the interview almost every respondent invariably mentioned the common saying that ‘...even the flames of the funeral pyre cannot burn the feet of an Agaria...’ By referring to the hardening of the feet due to prolonged exposure to brine, this line highlighted the deplorable health status of Agarais. All the respondents had lesions on their feet and suffered from eyesight problem. They added that before the distribution of gum boots and sun glasses by the government, the severity of these problems was very high. The doctor in Patdi government hospital was of the opinion that the prevalence of tuberculosis and hypertension are very high among the Agarias and are the leading causes of their early death. The intense physical activity involved in salt production under harsh conditions reduces the life expectancy of Agarias to around 50-55 years for men and 65-70 years for women. The health of Agarias is further impacted by the extremely poor diet consumed by them during their period of stay inside the Rann.

Families survive on a diet which mostly consists of only bajra rotlo, onions, a paste made of red chilies and garlic and khichdi. It is very common for men to consume local alcohol during the evening. The access to clean drinking water is another major problem faced by the respondents during their period of stay inside the Rann. Inspite of the provision of water through tankers by the Government of Gujarat, all the respondents have to spend around Rs. 2000 for purchasing drinking water from private tankers. Practice of open air defecation and scarcity of water for maintaining personal hygiene further increase their risk of contracting various diseases.

Everyone associated with the Agaria community linked their poor health status with their very low literacy rate. As shown in Table 6.1, 59.2 per cent of respondents of this study are illiterate. This figure rises to 75 per cent when only the respondents of the second and third groups are taken into consideration. The respondents stated that due to
the poor economic condition of their families coupled with the need to migrate to Rann every year, they could not enroll themselves in the school. These two reasons also forced the respondents who had enrolled in school to drop-out after continuing only for a year or two. As discussed in chapter 8, this issue of low literacy rate among the community members can play a critical role in deciding the position of Agarias in the livelihood and conservation debate.

Agaria women and their children occupy the most vulnerable position in their society. Due to the low life expectancy of the men, many women become widows very early in their lives. Referring to Junagam as ‘a village of widows’, one villager stated that in the absence of any social security measures and due to the practice of traders entering into an agreement only with a men of the Agaria family, the widows have to entirely depend on their sons. Usually widows stay with their youngest son as it is common for elder sons to move out of their parent’s house after their marriage. The parental property is also inherited by the youngest son. Staying in the Rann without any access to health facilities and proper RCH care, the situation of adolescent girls and young women is equally worse. It can be stated that the women of the Agaria community across all age groups and marital status lead a life full of miseries.

![Figure 6.2: Education of the Category I Respondents (%)](image)
'...the miseries of an Agaria start the day he is born and does not end even after he is burnt on his pyre...’, this local saying was also referred to by the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) in Kharaghoda while pointing out the high rate of maternal and child mortality in the community. Interestingly, all local sayings only speak of the pains endured by the men. The mention of sufferings of women can be found in the songs hummed by them during pagli work. The women are usually assisted by their children in the activities undertaken inside the Rann. It was a common sight to find children as young as four years working in the salt pans. It was reported that though the enrollment rate of children of the Agarias in schools has gone up due to the initiatives of voluntary organisations like Ganatar, who have taken up the challenge of opening schools inside the Rann and maintaining seasonal hostels to enable school going kids to stay in villages during the period of salt production, the drop-out rate after primary school is still very high. Mr. Sukhdevbhai Patel, founder of Ganatar and a noted social activist who has been working on the issues related to children for almost three decades was of the opinion that like all social concerns, the issue of rights of Agaria children is entrenched in the larger concerns impacting the lives and livelihoods of Agarias.

It can be concluded that the attempt to map the lives and livelihoods of Agarias involved detailed discussions around the entwined issues of their socio-economic vulnerability, the traditional knowledge possessed by them for producing inland salt and the future of their trade. Figure 6.3 shows the linkages between the issues in the lives and livelihood of Agarias.

![Figure 6.3: Linkage of Issues in the Lives and Livelihood of the Agarias](image-url)
It can also be deduced from analysis of the interview transcripts that while in the past, these issues were critical components of the force which bound the Agarias to the LRK, in the recent times they are contributing to their disassociation from the Rann and their livelihood of inland salt making. These issues have also impacted the stand taken by Agarias in relation to the perspectives and the efforts assumed by the conservationists. Undeniably, as will be seen in chapters 7 and 8, the notification of the Rann as a wild ass sanctuary has played a significant role in shaping these issues as components of the dissociating force. The discussions in this chapter have also brought to fore the fact that the lives and livelihoods of the Agarias are centred on their annual migration to the Rann. This annual shift is however shrouded in uncertainty due to the declining trade and the efforts of conservationists who are enamoured by the concept of ‘fortress conservation’.